

Financial crisis and higher education policies in Greece: between intra- and supranational pressures

Aristotelis Zmas

Published online: 28 June 2014

© The Author(s) 2014. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

Abstract The current financial crisis is blamed for the proliferation of neoliberal policies in Greek universities. However, this article argues that the imposition of relevant policies has wider causes linked to contradictions observed during the democratization and modernization of universities over the last 40 years. At the same time policymakers are seeking ‘external’ support to mitigate the doubts of pressure groups, such as academic staff, students, and mass media, regarding the need to implement unpopular reforms in Greek universities. Set against this political backdrop, the present article argues that the references of the Greek political leadership to European discourse about universities are a strategy to build alliances within the country for the promotion of neoliberal reforms in the field of tertiary education. The implementation of these reforms has been facilitated through the financial crisis, which has pressured the Greek governments to take immediate measures for the sake of the ‘national economy’.

Keywords Financial crisis · Higher education policies · Greece · EU · Local pressures

Introduction

Greece’s financial crisis is renowned. How the country, unable to deal with the situation on its own, sought external help and how, since May 2010, it has been supported by the so-called Troika (the EU, the ECB and the IMF). Both the pressure for a reduction in Greece’s financial deficit and the expectation that the state will be reformulated have led to the implementation of strict fiscal policies. Reductions in salaries and pensions, increase in taxation, cuts in social provision, the merger or abolishment of state organizations and a reduction in the numbers of employees in these organizations are all examples of such

A. Zmas (✉)
Schools of Arts and Education Science, European University Cyprus, Diogenous Str. 6, Engomi,
P.O. Box: 22006, 1516 Nicosia, Cyprus
e-mail: A.Zmas@euc.ac.cy

measures. At the same time, this fiscal austerity challenges social cohesion, causing strikes and increasing unemployment and poverty.

These developments have affected the educational sphere creating, amongst other things, an interest to restructure universities. The changes under consideration include new forms of governance, the merger of appropriate institutions, a squeeze on public funding, tighter financial controls and a strict review of management structures within the university sector more broadly. However, there have been reservations as to whether these neoliberal politics should be reinforced. Critics (Gouviás 2012) have focused on the fact that through these proposed changes central governments are looking only to save resources. Consequently, any resolution of the chronic problems facing tertiary education has been put on hold.

Yet to what extent is the current economic crisis responsible for the enactment of these policies? This article stresses that such an approach is rather simplistic and does not shed much light on the issue under investigation. In particular, it argues that although the current economic crisis has facilitated and accelerated the implementation of neoliberal reforms, it cannot be held entirely responsible for this situation. To understand the root causes of these reforms we need to look back 40 years at the general restructuring of the Greek state and the way in which universities functioned at that time. Currently, policymakers are seeking ‘external’ support to mitigate the doubts of pressure groups (e.g. academic staff, students, and mass media) regarding the need to implement unpopular reforms in Greek universities. This is not something new according to comparative researchers, who point out the political use of ‘external argument’ (Gonon 1998) to promote educational reforms within a country.

In order to document these claims, this article will analyse the transition from the so-called ‘democratic’ university of the 1980’s to that of the ‘market economy’. Initially it will analyse the process of democratization, as well as the problems that appeared over the course of time. It will then focus on the so-called ‘Europeanization’ of Greek higher education policy in the 1990’s, which has weathered the basic principles of the ‘democratic’ university, allowing neoliberal logic to infiltrate the way it functions. In exchange for their preservation, tertiary education institutions, who were accepting more and more students, were functioning with the help of European funds, even though the internal funding from the Greek governments was restricted. However, the gradual cuts of European funding combined with the current economic crisis have intensified the pathogenesis of the past, such as the underfunding of tertiary institutions by the Greek state. Therefore, today’s policymakers are being pressurized to implement unpopular educational reforms, whilst seeking an alibi for the promotion of neoliberal policies. European discourse about tertiary education provides a convenient alibi, one which in reality, or so the article argues, has been used by Greek universities -in some instances in a subtle manner, whereas in others in a secretive one- for over 20 years.

The ‘democratic’ university

The fall of the military junta (1974) and the establishment of parliamentary democracy set the foundations for a gradual democratization of Greek tertiary education institutions in the mid 1970’s. More specifically, article 16 of the Greek Constitution (1975) secured the freedom to teach and research in Greek universities. The latter were intended to have a public character and be self-managed.

The reinforcement of the democratic character of Greek tertiary education was realized a few years later with the voting of the law 1268/1982 (GMNERA 1982). The first article of the law stressed that the mission of universities was to shape responsible ‘human beings’ with scientific, social, cultural and political awareness, who would receive a comprehensive education appropriate for their scientific and professional careers. This was another instance where the importance of academic freedom in teaching and research was stressed. The law also included a beneficial provision regarding the self-managed character of the universities. It offered students and other members of the academic community the possibility of participating in matters of university governance. In this way it abolished the management of universities by specific individuals, which was a direct result of the wider responsibilities afforded to professors.

However, the self-managed character of universities became weak in practice. The main cause was that the decisions taken internally had to be approved at a central level, i.e. by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, state control remained powerful at a time when university funding was almost exclusively based on public funds. Initiatives whereby universities sought to connect more closely with the job market to raise funding remained unrealized. Such initiatives became ‘demonized’, since any further development was considered detrimental to the basic principles of the Humboldtian model. This model informed the establishment not only of the 1st Hellenic University of Otto in 1837, but that of other institutions as well in later years. According to the Humboldtian ideal, the university has an obligation to remain an educational site (‘Bildungsanstalt’), and function beyond its role as an institution for research and professional education (Humboldt [1810] 1996). The students were seen as ‘trainee researchers’ within the framework of a *laissez-faire* teaching and learning culture, free to choose lectures according to their personal interests. At the same time, academic personnel were expected to work independently of any kind of political and economic pressures, serving science above all. In addition, scientific strands were the focus of academic teaching and research under the auspices of a public funded university which enjoyed financial self-sufficiency and managerial autonomy.

In effect, three main factors led to a lack of competition between Greek tertiary institutions: the reservations of the academic community towards undertaking any entrepreneurial activity; its complacency in not seeking any funding due to state protectionism, and the limiting autonomous character of the Greek universities. Psacharopoulos (2003) maintained that Greece has utilized a direct allocation model, because all public funds were given directly to the institutions, without any interim assessment of their services having taken place. This lack of competition limited the pressure exerted on them to highlight their special profile, differentiate their mission and take innovative action. However, state interference spread to all areas within the public sector and was not limited to the area of tertiary education. The patrimonial character of the state, originating in Ottoman times, had a restraining impact on the modernization of the Greek economy and its ability to respond to international demands. Paradoxically, state mechanisms expanded even further to hide this lack of flexibility, thereby reinforcing the phenomena of clientelism and corruption. Recent international surveys confirm that such occurrences still persist in Greek society (Transparency International 2013), influencing the ‘microcosm’ of its universities. For example, political parties and student unions often used the ‘democratic right’ of students to participate in the processes of the election of university administrative bodies as a mechanism to ensure individual or partisan interests (Gotovos 2005).

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, the democratization of the universities happened alongside an increase in the number of students. This widened participation was a

trend in line with similar initiatives that had been happening in Europe since the 1970's. Widening of participation in Greek higher education was boosted in the second half of the 1980's due to the growth of universities across the country (Saiti and Prokopiadou 2008). The demand for academic studies can be understood in the context of the following: First, a need for young people to respond to the changing market. Second, an established belief that getting a degree reduces the risk of unemployment and increases the possibilities of finding a well-paid job. Many students actually perceived the acquisition of a degree as a passport for working in the public sector, which expanded in the mid 1980's. According to OECD (1997, p. 116), almost 75 % of the graduates were employed in the public sector 10 years later. Third, the low cost of studies, which allowed students to complete their studies without any major financial implications. This was made possible partly because of the lack of fees and partly due to the range of resources made available for free, such as textbooks. The fourth driver is of particular significance. Students from low socioeconomic groups believed that university would provide them with the opportunity to obtain social and cultural prestige (Tsoukalas 1977). This expectation discouraged some of the applicants from choosing studies that, despite their low prestige, opened up favourable professional prospects.

The main problem linked to widening participation in Greek tertiary education has been the difficulty of young graduates to enter the labour market (e.g. increasing unemployment, long time to find a job after graduation). This problem became apparent in the 1990's, when it became increasingly difficult to find employment in the public sector. During that decade the overall unemployment rate in Greece had risen to 11.3 %, while the corresponding rate in the EU-15 at that time did not exceed 8 %, with the exception of 1993–1996, when it reached 10 % (ELIAMEP 2006, pp. 13–15). The mismatch between Greek higher education and labour market requirements caused various controversies (Mattheou 2003). Industry representatives claimed that the graduates didn't acquire the right skills to respond to the needs of the market. According to them, the university courses were theoretical, encyclopaedic, and old fashioned. On the other hand, academics doubted the need for a more vocational orientation of the curricula. Furthermore, they maintained that universities should primarily produce and diffuse scientific knowledge, which would help the graduates enrich their professional experiences. The resolution of these controversies has so far turned into a Gordian knot. For example, 45 % of the Greek employers complained in a recent survey of McKinsey (2013) that they cannot find young employees possessing the necessary skills despite the high unemployment rate that exists due to the recent financial crisis.

However, the above complaints about the inadequacy of Greek universities should be under review. One has to consider the increasing number of their graduates who migrate in order to work abroad (<http://afroditi.uom.gr/rdpru/?q=el/node/198>). Moreover, Greek graduates of foreign universities are poor performers, when they seek employment in Greece (Lianos et al. 2004). The poor relationship between Greek universities and labour market are not also entirely a result of the alleged inability of these institutions to adapt to labour market's needs. It has been difficult for Greek universities to rely on their own resources to resolve the problems of unemployment or graduates gaining employment in jobs for which they were not trained. Indeed it would also require the concerted efforts of socio-political and financial institutions to eradicate these difficulties.

The inadequacy of the socio-political and financial systems played an equally important role. The Greek labour market has been slow in creating employment opportunities for highly educated employees. In addition, strict laws have prevented the entry of young professionals in the workplace (e.g. the highly regulated profession of pharmacist), while

phenomena of corruption (e.g. informal agreements between dominant firms on prices) have limited the potential for transparent competition. It is also necessary to take into account the lack of continuity in the efforts of the Greek state in reforming its productive structures. More specifically, the de-industrialization of Greece accompanied by the enlargement of the public service sector has taken place without the prior completion of the stage of industrial ‘maturation’ (Ioakimidis 1984). This has led to the production of low-cost products locally, the increase of imports (e.g. in the fields of technology and car manufacturing) and the running of SMEs as family businesses. These family enterprises are not oriented towards knowledge-intensive activities, consequently limiting the demand for highly educated personnel.

The dependency on foreign capital was an obstacle in promoting policies for growth, which would have been based on internal productive forces. The European funding for agriculture at the time is indicative of the whole issue. These grants -which were part of the general EU support for Greece—were designed to reduce the financial gap between Greece and the rest of the member-states, especially those from north-western Europe. However, this failed to lead to the modernization of the agricultural production. Similar problems were observed in other sectors of production, resulting in Greece’s poor performance at the European and international level. Many of the aforementioned problems remain unsolved. Based again on the McKinsey research, 73 % of the workers in the Greek private sector are still employed in SMEs. The latter have limited ability to increase the number of their employees. Simultaneously, their difficulty to recruit suitable employees is due to the unsuccessful advertising of job vacancies.

The process of ‘Europeanization’

The ‘crisis talk’ regarding the mismatch between the tertiary education sector and the requirements of the labour market has reinforced the pressure for the restructuring of the Greek universities. Their restructuring has been associated with their efforts to become involved in European networks and projects. This has been the case since the 1990’s, when the EU emerged as a visible player in terms of influencing Greek education policies. Well-known postulates of the European education discourse, such as evaluation, accountability, quality and efficiency, gradually permeated Greek affairs, as well as those in neighboring countries (Zmas 2012). It should be noted that there are various definitions of ‘Europeanization’. In this paper the concept of ‘Europeanization’ refers to the ‘process of reshaping national politics as a result of policies and preferences advanced through the EU level of governance’ (Bache and Jordan 2006, p. 30).

In order to trace the beginning of the ‘Europeanization’ process in Greek universities, one should look into previous decades. Prokou (2003) has indicated that the impact of supranational organizations on Greek tertiary education had already started in the 1960’s. Over the course of time the then EEU was the major supranational organization responsible for influencing the modernization of Greek higher institutions. This happened after the accession of Greece into the EEU in 1981. The establishment, for example, of the Technological Educational Institutions was justified by the Ministry of Education for two main reasons. First, the restructuring of higher education was seen to be a necessity in order for Greece to follow the process of European economic unification. Second, a non-university sector was already established in Western European countries contributing to their financial and educational development and that Greece should adopt a similar strategy.

Inevitably, the ‘Europeanization’ of the Greek universities has been influenced by contradictions in their democratization process. In particular, laws that were passed to limit phenomena such as the nepotism regarding the operation of the universities were not actually implemented. For example, the law 2083/1992 (GMNERA 1992) and more specifically its article 24 dealt with the overall evaluation of Greek tertiary education. Amongst others, provision was made for the creation of evaluation committees, the formulation of indicators, and a reconsideration of ways of funding. Despite the passing of this law, its dictates were not implemented, as the academic community exercised a strong veto. The academic community was concerned that the ‘self-contained’ universities would weaken, leading to further cuts in their public funding. These reservations could be understood, if one takes into account the mistrust that existed towards any proposals coming from the state. This mistrust was associated with the clientelism endorsed by policymakers and influential groups within the universities (e.g. academic personnel, student unions). The result was the lack of an evaluation system for the tertiary sector, as well as all other levels of Greek education.

Moreover, the Greek tertiary sector continued to expand, as the respective governments proceeded with the creation of more university departments at a regional level. This expansion aimed at the financial and social development of Greek provinces at a period when the motto of ‘Europe of the regions’ was especially popular. However, the emergence of the newly founded departments into centers fostering innovative research was not always realized at the desired degree (Lambrianidis 2010). Some of them served predominantly the interests of the political parties and local communities, rather than the needs required at a regional level. In several instances, the lack of clarity regarding their mission led to degrees that offered no career prospects to graduates. The admission of these graduates to specific institutions required lower than average marks in the university entrance exams compared with the requirements of equivalent departments of other central universities. As a matter of fact, several students from regional universities pursued successful transfers to other central and more popular universities. Moreover, regional universities had to deal with issues regarding their material and technical infrastructure. Similar observations can be drawn in relation to the process of staffing these institutions with academic personnel, who tended to face less competition in the selection and employment process. Several members of staff saw their employment as a stepping stone to working at a more centrally located institution. At the same time the whole situation was deteriorating as a result of the phenomenon of ‘flying professors’, who stayed in the regional university 2 days a week, while the rest of the week they remained in their main place of residence (usually in Athens or Thessaloniki).

Despite the aforementioned complexities, universities had started getting involved in European projects on evaluation from the mid 1990’s, familiarizing themselves with evaluation mechanisms. This change in their stance can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, control mechanisms had already been established in the European tertiary education sector. This trend induced a kind of peer pressure at Greek universities, since they wished to remain abreast of European challenges, avoiding the risk of international isolation. Several institutions had put their trust in the creation of Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the EU.

In reality the European Union funds helped to accelerate the ‘Europeanization’ process of Greek universities from the end of the 1990’s (Gouvias 2011). More specifically, the EU funded Operational Programme of Education and Initial Vocational training (OPEIVT) was the most influential mechanism in the restructuring of the Greek educational system, including the universities. These programmes were part of the Second Community Support

Framework and aimed to fund innovative projects in regions of Europe that were financially and technologically underdeveloped. OPEIVTs essentially preserved people's demand for widened access to university and free studies in a period when the Greek state was unable to adequately fund universities any further. Moreover, EU funds were raised to the status of 'deus ex machina' for several newly founded university departments in Greece, since EU funds constituted the main source of their funding at least during the first years of their operation. These specific universities offered courses in finance, business and technology. The establishment of study programmes with a pragmatic orientation was considered a necessary imperative to resolve the chronic problem of Greek universities' tenuous connection with the market. OPEIVTs also helped to supplement the income of academic and other university personnel, made the continuation of research programmes possible and helped with the modernization of laboratory equipment.

On the other hand, a section of Greek academics viewed the OPEIVT as a 'Trojan Horse'. They expressed their concerns about the sustainability of the changes introduced, at a time when there was pressure to attract as much European funding as possible. They raised the question of whether the new landscape of Greek tertiary education could be maintained after the EU funding stopped. They also expressed concerns regarding the means of administrating EU funds, as the latter was the object of dispute between clientelistic networks (Mavrogiorgos 2003). According to other researchers (Xanthopoulos 2005), OPEIVTs, along with the participation of Greece in the Bologna Process (BP), opened the way to the marketization of Greek universities. Most critique focused on the one-sided design of programmes with a utilitarian character, the weakening of humanistic education, the transformation of academic personnel into 'homo economicus', and finally in the imposition of fees for postgraduate programmes of study. The introduction of fees was actually firmly established in the following decade, challenging the basic principle of the former 'democratic university'. From the middle of the 2000's, universities have also been actively seeking private funds, given the limited funding provided by the state.

Financial crisis and marketization

Greek universities' attempts to move towards a more entrepreneurial model of organization and to align further with the demands of the EHEA became a one way road during the 2000's. Moving away from the Humboldtian ideal, as a principle of orientation regarding their operation, universities kept abreast of the equivalent European educational discourse. The European Commission (2003) outlined, for example, the tendency of the universities to distance themselves from the aforementioned ideal, on their way to a Europe of 'Economy and Society of Knowledge'. The main challenges for the European universities had now become: the effective administration of limited resources, a closer connection with industry and companies, quality assurance, the formation of reliable evaluation mechanisms, the creation of networks and centres of excellence, and finally international competition.

The infiltration of European educational discourse into Greek tertiary education is evident in a series of laws that were passed during that period. The laws 3374/2005, 3549/2007 and 4009/2011 were the most important. More specifically, law 3374/2005 (GMNERA 2005) aimed to assure quality in higher education. The passing of this law was an attempt to create evaluation mechanisms in Greek universities, following the basic principles of the BP. Through this process, Greece had actually committed itself to establishing a national system of quality assurance by the time of the Bergen meeting in

2005. Law 3374/2005 specified the mechanisms for internal and external evaluation of universities and their specific departments, the use of evaluation indicators, the establishment of ECTS, and the provision of a diploma supplement. Provision was also made for the foundation of an independent organization (ADIP), which would guarantee the transparency of the evaluation processes, its mission being to support universities in their attempts to improve their quality of services. 2 years later this organization became incorporated into the ENQA.

The passing of the law 3374/2005 caused a back-lash. Intense debates led to a disagreement between academics (Prokou 2010). Opponents to the law stressed that it would limit the academic freedom and would reinforce the dependency of universities on market strategies. On the other hand, supporters of the reforms hoped for further ‘Europeanization’ of the Greek tertiary sector. Reform supporters gradually increased due to four main factors. First, the two governmental parties -in which several faculty members were ideologically adjacent- supported the enforcement of the law. Secondly, Greek policy-makers reassured their European partners that they would contribute to the realization of the EHEA by adopting, *inter alia*, a quality control system in domestic higher education. Thirdly, the pressure for the implementation of the law increased, because of the policy of league tables. More specifically, the participation of Greek policymakers in European working groups, such as the Bologna follow-up meetings, led to the setting up of projects aimed at establishing evaluation indicators and the implementation of peer-reviewing practices. The low ranking of Greece in league tables concerning the quality assurance within the BP led the Ministry of Education to prioritize relevant reforms (Asderaki 2009, pp. 108–110). Fourthly, the Hellenic Federation of University Teachers’ Association (POSDEP), i.e. the official trade union of Greek academics, stopped representing all its members, due to its extreme opposition to the law (Stamelos and Kavasakalis 2011). This led to some academics pursuing the creation of bottom-up movements and networks, which exhibited a moderate stance towards the proposed changes.

The adoption of the proposed changes at a European level was subsequently endorsed a few years later with the voting of the law 3549/2007 (GMNERA 2007). Its aim was to open up universities to new students with the establishment of programmes in a foreign language. The buzz words included in this law reflected the discourse of similar European Union projects on tertiary education (e.g. European Commission 2009); such terms included, ‘internationalization’, ‘attraction’, ‘openness’, ‘development’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘quality’, ‘transparency’ and ‘citizen’, the latter used instead of the word ‘human being’.

This law also aimed at a further development of the university, as well as motivating the universities in setting up a 4 year Development Academic Planning. The setting up of this strategic planning programme was seen to be a requirement for every university in order to maintain its public funding. All these took place at a period when the Greek economy was already in decline, a sign of the crisis to come. Several institutions uploaded their internal evaluations on their websites for the first time, in order to align themselves with the aims of the Ministry of Education and to avoid the danger of having their public funding suspended.

The law 4009/2011 (GMNELLRA 2011), which was passed when Greece was already in the support mechanism of Troika, took the previous law further. As anticipated, the dire financial position of the country affected the discussions for a restructuring of Greek universities along the lines of achieving ‘excellence’ and ‘internationalization’ of their curriculum. Thus, an actual (economic) crisis amplified the chronic ‘crisis’ of Greek universities, due to the problems of their ‘democratization’ and incomplete ‘Europeanization’. The economic crisis was a ‘Sputnik moment’ for the Greek political leaders, who

had to deliver and implement among others, the planned changes in the domestic tertiary education sector, following similar measures taken for the sake of the economy. Once more the reorganization of Greek universities became a subject of controversy between the Ministry of Education and members of the academic community, increasing the interest of the mass media and the public in these affairs. For example, some student unions were against the law, because it would weaken their role in the processes of the election of university administrative bodies.

The law 4009/2011 proposed the merger of specific departments or whole universities, as well as a change in their governance, according to the needs of the ‘national economy’; a project that was promoted with the ‘Athena plan’. According to the at-the-time Minister of Education, Anna Diamantopoulou (2011), ‘analogous policies’ had already taken place in other small-sized countries around the world, such the Nordic ones. For instance, one could focus on Denmark, as the at-the-time Prime Minister George Papandreou had already envisioned Greece as the ‘Denmark of the South’ (<http://www.imerisia.gr>). Denmark had actually introduced reforms from the beginning of the 2000’s, encouraging the independence of its universities under public-sector administration (Milthers 2011). Moreover, the new management structures had strengthened the decision-making power of these institutions. The main objective was to create better links between research, industry and commerce. Other changes involved the merging of universities and/or national government research institutions. The concentration of research activities in fewer institutions, which was also followed by an increase in government funding, was expected to enhance the international competitiveness of Danish universities. Lastly, the reforms secured a more diversified funding base for the universities, providing their manager with better potentials to make long-term decisions. On the negative side, the reforms intensified the concerns over the limitation of the academic freedom.

The orientation of the Greek Ministry of Education towards ‘foreign examples’ -in this case Denmark and other small-sized countries- is an instance of policy borrowing drawing on the theory of ‘externalisation’ (Schriewer 1990; Steiner-Khamsi 2004). According to this concept, global trends, international standards, best practices and examples, references societies, lessons from abroad and so on are locally invoked to promote or not domestic reforms in education. For example, a government may face opposition from pressure groups within the country, when it seeks to impose an educational reform. In this case, the government can try to convince the public of the necessity of the proposed changes, arguing that similar changes have taken place successfully in other countries. Indeed, the ‘external argument’ or the politics of ‘transnational references’ are used oft as a source of authority to carry out reforms in societies, which are in a process of ‘radical break with the past’ and going through ‘reconstruction’.

The above mentioned strategy on behalf of the Greek Ministry of Education constituted a mechanism for promoting higher education reforms, the aptness of which was contested inside the country. A policy of this kind points to a belief that educational discourses and practices are transposed in a linear way from country to country or from supranational organizations such as the European Union to their member-states. However, every educational transfer, discursive or factual, is a complex process with unclear effects. This issue is widely discussed in the field of comparative and international education, emphasizing the need for more contextualized research. According to Cowen (2009), the export and import of educational models across time and space can be analysed through the processes of transfer, translation (re-interpretation) and transformation (metamorphose) of ‘buzz words’, ‘ideas’, ‘discourses’, ‘best practices’ or ‘lessons from abroad’ in the national particularities or local idiosyncrasies. These processes have to be taken into account in

discussions on the use of the above-mentioned ‘Danish’ or any other model as ‘good example’ for the reconstruction of the Greek higher education. Before comparing the ‘analogous policies’ in tertiary education of Greece and Denmark, it is necessary to consider several factors, such as the different contexts of the two countries or the dissimilar timing when the reforms were implemented. For example, although Denmark has never officially gone into recession, there was a lot of concern about the repercussions of the Greek financial collapse. Thus, the merging of the Danish universities was not associated with reduced state funding in contrast to what happened in Greece. Furthermore, the changes in Danish tertiary sector were made prior to the global economic crisis unlike in Greece, where the reforms were designed when the crisis had already set in. Generally, comparative studies, such these of EUA (<http://www.eua.be/>) and UNESCO (UNESCO Bangkok 2012), have highlighted the fact that higher education systems around the world have been affected in distinct ways, reflecting, to some extent, the impact of the global financial crisis on national economies.

The use of ‘external argument’ as a means of applying pressure to implement changes in Greek universities was also evident in the frequent references made to law 4009/2011 in the ‘European and international practices’. Each institution was invited to improve the services it offered, aligning itself with the basic principles of the EHEA. Programmes of study were expected to lead to degrees that are transparent and comparable with the proposed European Qualifications Framework. Every institution was also expected to provide services for lifelong learning, to promote Centres of Excellence, and finally to set up a company for the most effective use of its resources. State funding would be provided according to ‘objective’ indicators which relate to the quality of their services (e.g. evaluation of teaching, career prospects of graduates), their research excellence (e.g. number of publication and references per professor, participation in international competitive programmes) and the degree of internationalization (e.g. number of international students). The set-up of ‘objective’ indicators went hand in hand with similar EU initiatives, especially with its attempts to establish a multidimensional ranking of higher education institutions (U-Multirank) in Europe and around the world (van Vught and Ziegele 2011).

The interest of policymakers and the media in the ranking of Greek universities in well-known league tables increased when discussions for reforms in tertiary education started taking place. According to Batztis and Aggelopoulos (2012), the daily press has cultivated the impression that the international rankings of Greek universities reveal their low quality. On the other hand, researchers noted that Greek universities perform better –especially in specific research areas—than what is illustrated in such measurements (Caloghirou 2010). However, the league tables as mechanisms to evaluate the quality of universities have to be utilized carefully, considering the debate on the reliability of these indexes (Hazelkorn 2011).

This raises the question whether the current changes will be implemented alongside the alignment of Greek universities with the demands of the EHEA. As it has been outlined in the analysis attempted in this article, several of the decrees passed in relation to tertiary education by various governments were not put into practice. The main reason was the reaction of various lobby groups linked with the organization and operation of the universities. The widespread belief that the more centralized the educational system of a country is, the easier it is to promote changes by the state, has some limitations. Taking into account the case of the Greek universities it is deemed necessary to take into account the role that the lobby groups play during the implementation, or not, of centrally proposed reforms.

However, the improvements that have taken place in Greek higher education over the last decade are now becoming visible. Focusing, for example, on recent changes related to the quality assurance in Greek universities, it appears that most of their departments have already established mechanisms for internal and external evaluation. Moreover, according to the ADIP (2013), the external evaluation reports regarding the effort of the Greek universities to provide services of high quality are positive, despite the adverse framework of their operation. Improvements have also been observed in the implementation of the laws 3374/2005, 3549/2007 and 4009/2011, which were intended to familiarize the Greek universities with ‘European and international practices’. For instance, an increasing number of universities are setting Development Academic Planning (e.g. Council of University of Thessaly 2014). Their strategic objectives, such as the production of innovative knowledge and research, effectiveness, international recognition, and financial and administrative autonomy are aligned with the aim of the EU to modernize the tertiary sector of its member-states.

Conclusion

The main argument in the article has been that the neoliberal policies implemented in the Greek tertiary education sphere do not exclusively derive from the current economic crisis. The latter has undoubtedly increased the degree and pace at which changes have been promoted. The reasons for these changes are broader. As has been argued, it is necessary to take into account the difficulties that were presented in the process of restructuring the Greek universities over the last 40 years, as well as the impact of international organizations, especially that of the EU. The difficulties debated in this article were mainly attributed to a distorted perception of the democratization of higher education. This perception has led to a suffocating control by the state, heightening the problems of bureaucracy, nepotism and lack of reliable evaluation mechanisms. Generally, the search for the causes and effects of the neoliberal policies in higher education for a country should not be limited to economic frameworks.

Furthermore, the case of Greece proves that it is important to examine all processes taking place in the area of tertiary education, taking into account the wider socioeconomic, political and cultural context. The university cannot change, if we only change the specific institution. The article stresses that in order to understand the problems that appeared in the process of democratization and modernization of the Greek universities, we should also look to factors beyond the sphere of education, which have influenced these processes. From the analysis presented here, such factors are, amongst others, the constantly expanding state mechanism and the political party interests this has served.

Moreover, the production of educational discourse about universities is no longer a matter for internal political debate of each country. The restructuring of the Greek university from the middle of 1990’s has proved that the educational ‘flows’ and ‘policy-scapes’ (Carney 2012) are more complex and difficult to discern in the contemporary context of interaction across national and international networks. Taking into account the diffusion of European discourse about universities in Greece, it becomes clear that supranational organizations such as the EU are turning into new ‘metropolises’ of educational borrowing and lending. Therefore, scientific approaches to tertiary education should extend beyond the framework of the national and local context. An exploration of relevant topics should take into account that educational processes beyond the territory of a country are possibly more important than the equivalent ones within it. At the same time,

‘global trends’ do not travel in a vacuum. As they travel, they transform to the national and local particularities. Moreover, they are likely to be confronted with doubt and resistance and finally face being turned down by lobby groups within a country. The latter has become evident in the case of Greece, through difficulties and delays in the process of ‘Europeanization’ of its tertiary education.

The recent economic crisis brought to the surface all the above mentioned problems of the Greek universities. The crucial question that arises now is: Can the economic crisis be an opportunity for the rebirth of Greek higher education? For the time being it seems difficult for one to offer a comprehensive response. This is due to the complexity of the problems and the lack of long-term planning in dealing with them, especially since every successful reform needs continuity over a relatively long period. It would also require a length of time to understand whether the above mentioned reforms have been successful. However, the economic crisis reiterates more than ever the need to build trust between the Greek state and its universities, so as to seek collective solutions. In such a case, someone could hope for the rebirth of both the Greek universities and the wider society.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits any use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

References

- ADIP (2013). *Annual report (2012–2013)*. Athens: ADIP. (in Greek).
- Asderaki, F. (2009). The impact of the Bologna Process on the development of the Greek quality assurance system. *Quality in Higher Education*, 15(2), 105–122.
- Bache, I., & Jordan, A. (2006). Europeanization and domestic change. In I. Bache & A. Jordan (Eds.), *The Europeanization of British politics* (pp. 17–33). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Batzis, A., & Aggelopoulos, G. (2012). *Simple propaganda courses: international rankings of Greek universities in printed press*. Retrieved September 18, 2013, from <http://enthemata.wordpress.com>.
- Caloghirou, Y. (2010). Greek university: A factory of university degrees or a vehicle of change towards the knowledge economy and society? In A. Dimitropoulos, N. Maravegias & A. Mitsos (Eds.), *The university today* (pp. 184–190). Athens: Themelio.
- Carney, S. (2012). Imaging globalisation. Educational policyscapes. In G. Steiner-Khamisi & F. Waldow (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 2012: Policy borrowing and lending in education* (pp. 339–353). London: Routledge.
- Council of University of Thessaly. (2014). *Strategic planning for the development of University of Thessaly*. Volos: University of Thessaly.
- Cowen, R. (2009). The transfer, translation and transformation of educational processes: And their shape-shifting? *Comparative Education*, 45(3), 315–327.
- Diamantopoulou, A. (2011). *Interview on SKY-TV*. Retrieved July 2, 2013, from <http://www.skai.gr/player/TV/?MMID=216180>.
- ELIAMEP. (2006). *The transition of Greek universities graduates in the labour market*. Athens: ELIAMEP. (in Greek).
- European Commission (2003). *Communication from the Commission. The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*. COM (2003) 58 final, 05 Feb 2003.
- European Commission (2009). *Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education*. COM (2009) 487 final, 21.09.2009.
- GMNELLRA [Greek Ministry of National Education, Life-long Learning and Religious Affairs] (2011). *Structure, Operation, Quality Assurance of Higher Studies and Internationalization of HE Institutions: L. 4009/2011*. Athens: Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic (in Greek).
- GMNERA [Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs]. (1982). *Structure and Function of Higher Education Institutions: L. 1268/1982*. Athens: Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic. (in Greek).

- GMNERA [Greek Ministry of National Education, Religious Affairs]. (1992). *Evaluation of activities of Higher Education Institutions: L. 2083/1992*. Athens: Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic. (in Greek).
- GMNERA [Greek Ministry of National Education, Religious Affairs]. (2005). *Quality assurance in higher education. Credit transfer and accumulation system—Diploma supplement: L. 3374/2005*. Athens: Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic. (in Greek).
- GMNERA [Greek Ministry of National Education, Religious Affairs]. (2007). *Reform of the institutional framework regarding the structures and operations of the Greek Higher Education Institutes: L. 3549/07*. Athens: Official Journal of the Hellenic Republic. (in Greek).
- Gonon, P. (1998). *Das Internationale Argument in der Bildungsreform. Die Rolle internationaler Bezüge in den bildungspolitischen Debatten zur schweizerischen und zur englischen Reform der Sekundarstufe II*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Gotovos, A. (2005). Inequity and clientelistic networks in Greek universities: The collapse of the public sector and the evaluation of Higher Education. *Science and Society*, 14, 33–83. (in Greek).
- Gouvias, D. (2011). EU funding and issues of “marketisation” of higher education in Greece. *European Educational Research Journal*, 10(3), 393–406.
- Gouvias, D. (2012). The post-modern rhetoric of recent reforms in Greek higher education. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 10(2), 282–313.
- Hazelskorn, E. (2011). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education. The battle for world-class excellence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Humboldt, W. von [1810] (1996). Ueber die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin. In A. Flitner, & K. Giel (Eds.), *Humboldt, W. v. Werke in fünf Bänden. Bd. IV: Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen* (5th ed., pp. 255–266). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Ioakimidis, P. (1984). Greece: From military dictatorship to socialism. In A. Williams (Ed.), *Southern Europe transformed: Political and economic change in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain* (pp. 33–60). London: Harper & Row.
- Lambrianidis, L. (2010). The Greek University Stranded in the Policy of Establishing Regional Universities. *European Planning Studies*, 18(12), 2009–2026.
- Lianos, T., Asteriou, D., & Agiomirgianakis, G. (2004). Foreign university graduates in the Greek labour market: Employment, salaries and overeducation. *International Journal of Finance & Economics*, 9(2), 151–164.
- Mattheou, D. (2003). The reform of the Greek University. A desideratum in abeyance. *European Education*, 35(3), 31–43.
- Mavrogiorgos, G. (2003). Identifying the educational policy for the school teacher in the Ministry of Education operational programmes (OPEIVT). In G. Bagakis (Ed.), *School teacher and the European dimension in education* (pp. 349–365). Athens: Metaxmio. (in Greek).
- McKinsey (2013). *Education to employment: Getting Europe's youth into work*. Retrieved December 15, 2013, from http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/social_sector.
- Milthers, P. (2011). Danish universities in the financial crisis: Change and trust. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 23(1), 1–17.
- OECD (1997). *Reviews of national policies for education: Greece*. Paris: OECD.
- Prokou, E. (2003). International influences on educational policy—withspecial reference to the technological sector of higher education—in Greece as a European semi-periphery. *Compare*, 33(3), 301–313.
- Prokou, E. (2010). University reform in Greece: A shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values. In D. Mattheou (Ed.), *Changing educational landscapes. Educational policies, schooling systems and higher education—A comparative perspective* (pp. 59–74). London: Springer.
- Psacharopoulos, G. (2003). *Greek education: A modern tragedy*. Athens: Sideris. (in Greek).
- Saiti, A., & Prokopiadou, G. (2008). The demand for higher education in Greece. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(3), 285–296.
- Schriewer, J. (1990). The method of comparison and the need for externalization: Methodological criteria and sociological concepts. In J. Schriewer (Ed.), *Theories and methods in comparative education* (3rd ed., pp. 25–83). Frankfurt/a.M.: Peter Lang.
- Stamelos, G., & Kavasakalis, A. (2011). The public debate on a quality assurance system for Greek universities. *Quality in Higher Education*, 17(3), 353–368.
- Steiner-Khamisi, G. (Ed.). (2004). *The global politics of educational borrowing and lending*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Transparency International (2013). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2013*. Retrieved March 5, 2014, from <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>.

- Tsoukalas, K. (1977). *Dependence and reproduction: the social role of educational mechanisms in Greece 1830–1922*. Athens: Themelio. (in Greek).
- UNESCO Bangkok. (2012). *The impact of economic crisis on higher education*. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok.
- van Vught, F., & Ziegele, F. (Eds.). (2011). *U-Multirank. Design and testing the feasibility of a multidimensional global university ranking. Final report*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Xanthopoulos, T. (2005). *Hellenic education*. Athens: Gutenberg. (in Greek).
- Zmas, A. (2012). The Transformation of the European Educational Discourse in the Balkans. *European Journal of Education*, 47(3), 364–377.